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Kristina Marie Darling
University of Missouri-St. Louis, kmdn96@mail.umsl.edu

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Kristina Marie Darling
M.A. in American Culture Studies, Washington University in St. Louis, 2009
B.S. in English, Washington University in St. Louis, 2007

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Advisory Committee

Brit Brogaard, Ph.D.
Chairperson

Anna Alexandrova, Ph.D.

David Griesedieck, M.A.

Abstract

In this paper I compare Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* and Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power*, focusing on their treatment of melancholia. The two works prove similar as they appropriate this Freudian concept for feminist ends, suggesting that the mourning, loss, and personal renewal associated with melancholia afford unique opportunities for self-discovery. With that said, the two philosophers present fundamentally different assessments of melancholia as it relates to cultural discourses. Throughout *Black Sun*, Kristeva suggests that the process of articulating personal loss—whether through psychoanalysis, art, or literature—allows the individual to re-imagine his or her perceived identity. Kristeva envisions this process as an individualistic one, as she discusses the psyche apart from larger cultural and historical discourses. Butler, on the other hand, presents the individual psyche as socially constructed. Because she defines melancholia as the mourning of possibilities for one's identity that have been foreclosed by society, the process of acknowledging and articulating personal loss prompts the subject to question oppressive cultural discourses. Thus Butler, unlike Kristeva, posits melancholia as having profound social and political consequences. In my paper, I defend Butler's position as the more compelling of the two. Research methods consist primarily of textual analysis, which focuses on *Black Sun*, *The Psychic Life of Power*, critiques of these two works by contemporary feminist philosophers, and Freud's earlier writings on melancholia. I conclude that Butler's argument affords concrete possibilities for social justice, which remain largely absent from Kristeva's book. *The Psychic Life of Power* not only revises Freudian ideas, but it offers a theoretical framework for understanding

culture, within which social categories can be revised, cultural discourses can be questioned, and otherness can be embraced.

Introduction

In some respects, Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* and Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* offer comparable responses to Sigmund Freud's writings on melancholia. Although Freud presents this state of mind as aberrant, even pathological, in such works as "Mourning and Melancholia," *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Kristeva and Butler re-envision melancholia as a source of source of personal transformation. With that said, *Black Sun* and *The Psychic Life of Power* prove similar as they appropriate this concept for feminist ends, suggesting that the loss, mourning, and personal renewal associated with melancholia afford unique opportunities for self-discovery.

For Butler, this process of individual transformation has profound social and political consequences. She presents the individual psyche as a product of cultural discourses, particularly those pertaining to gender and sexuality. This idea is exemplified in Butler's discussions of melancholia, in which she argues that one mourns possible gender identities that are prohibited by cultural practices. For example, she argues that bisexuality is the norm, yet society forces one to treat heterosexuality as such. Throughout *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler urges the individual to reclaim agency by divesting these oppressive cultural discourses of their power. While Butler offers a compelling portrait of contemporary discourses surrounding gender norms, philosopher Moya Lloyd challenges her viewpoint in a recent work entitled *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*. According to Lloyd, such an argument seems problematic in that Butler does not tell us how we can re-imagine the norms that shape the individual psyche without "threatening the subject with psychic dissolution" (101).

Likewise, Julia Kristeva's application of Freudian ideas has given rise to both praise and controversy. Throughout *Black Sun*, she presents psychoanalysis as a unique rhetorical space where women and other marginalized social groups can explore and re-envision their perceived identities. For Kristeva, melancholia and its disruption of normal psychological processes serve as a catalyst for this personal transformation. Although *Black Sun* renders psychoanalysis compatible with feminist concerns, philosopher Anne Marie Smith challenges Kristeva's argument in a work entitled *Julia Kristeva: Speaking the Unspeakable*. In Smith's assessment, Kristeva's portrayals of gender seem normative, as she presents us with static definitions of masculinity and femininity. In society, Smith argues, one actually observes a dynamic evolution of gender identities. Likewise, Kristeva's discussion of melancholia also exhibits normative qualities, as she often examines the individual psyche apart from larger social and cultural structures.

While Moya Lloyd and Anne Marie Smith offer valid criticisms of both of these arguments, my paper will defend Butler's position as the more nuanced and compelling of the two. *Black Sun* and *The Psychic Life of Power* certainly prove similar as they appropriate the Freudian concept of melancholia for feminist ends, suggesting that the formerly pathologized emotion offers unique opportunities for self-discovery and social change, respectively. While this may be true, Butler's work problematizes Kristeva's presentation of melancholia as a highly individual emotion, suggesting instead that melancholia must be understood within a matrix of complex cultural ideas and practices. As a result, *The Psychic Life of Power* offers an application of Freudian ideas with concrete social and political consequences that remain largely absent from Kristeva's

discussions of melancholia.

Freud, Melancholia, and the Possibility of Transformation

First published in 1917, Freud's groundbreaking essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," offered the first comprehensive definition of melancholia, which proved highly influential for both Kristeva and Butler. In Freud's assessment, object loss in the melancholic subject is "transformed into ego loss," as the individual fails to redirect his or her psychic energy onto another object (586). Rather, the emotions that the individual had invested in the lost object are "withdrawn into the ego," resulting in a "cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego altered by identification" (586). Thus melancholia disrupts a delicate balance that exists between the various aspects of the individual's mental life.

For Freud, melancholia is not a source of insight, as it later becomes for Butler and Kristeva, but a potentially fatal disturbance of one's usual mental processes. He describes melancholia as a "pathological mourning," in which the individual loses "the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life" (584-586). Rather than presenting melancholia as a transformative state of mind, as his successors do, Freud merely advocates a return to normalcy for the afflicted subject. In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, he calls for the restoration of the melancholic individual's natural "ego-instincts," which he perceives as necessary to the individual's functioning in society (372).

Approached with these ideas in mind, Butler and Kristeva both offer radical revisions of Freud's discussion of melancholia. Both philosophers re-imagine

melancholia not as a desire to cease being altogether, as Freud does, but rather as a desire to find a new way of existing in the world. As a result, melancholia becomes a catalyst for personal transformation. For Kristeva, this is precisely because it involves a disturbance of the usual mental processes that Freud describes. Throughout *Black Sun*, she describes the "object loss" and "ego loss" of melancholia as initiating a break with the linguistic discourses in which one normally participates. By defining recovery as a return to language, Kristeva presents melancholia as an opportunity to explore one's perceived identity by articulating personal loss. In this sense, psychoanalysis becomes a rhetorical space where individuals may begin to re-imagine and redefine the self. Thus Kristeva's work forms a stark contrast with that of Freud, who envisions melancholia as a temporary, albeit unwelcome, disturbance of one's mental life.

In Kristeva's assessment, however, the linguistic paralysis associated with melancholia prompts the subject to irrevocably redefine his or her relationship to language. This transformation, in her assessment, is possible in both psychoanalysis and the creative arts. Indeed, Kristeva suggests that this process is enacted in such works of art as Holbein's *Dead Christ,* Marguerite Duras's *La Maladie de la mort*, and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. According to philosopher John Lechte, the subject in Kristeva's work actively creates his or her perceived self through artistic endeavors. He writes that " Kristeva conceptualizes art as a process or practice which actively creates the subject, rather than the creation of art objects" (24). In many ways, these ideas are exemplified in Kristeva's discussion of aesthetic forgiveness in the fiction of Dostoevsky. She explains,

> Forgiveness emerges first as the setting up of a form. It has the effect of an acting out, a doing, a poesis. Giving shape to relations between insulted and humiliated individuals---group harmony. Giving shape to signs---harmony of the work, without exegesis, without explanation, without understanding. Technique and art. The primary aspect of such an action clarifies why it has the ability to reach, beyond words and intellections, emotions and bruised bodies....Whoever is in the realm of forgiveness---who forgives and accepts forgiveness---is capable of identifying with a loving father, an imaginary father, with whom, consequently, he is ready to be reconciled, with a new symbolic law in mind. (206-207)

In passages like this one, Kristeva presents forgiveness in Dostoevsky's fiction as a step toward becoming reintegrated with linguistic discourse. She envisions melancholia as a loss of linguistic meaning, a condition she refers to as "asymbolia." For Kristeva, forgiveness presupposes meaning on a more personal level. This personal meaning ultimately serves as a foundation for linguistic meaning. As a result, the process of giving and receiving forgiveness leads the subject back to a complete identification with the real, imaginary, and symbolic realms.

The transformation that Kristeva envisions through melancholia, however, takes place on a purely individual level, as the analysand forges a new identity by articulating personal loss, rather than social and political disenfranchisement. Consider Kristeva's discussion of the work of poet Gerard de Nerval,

> The amassing of names (which refer to historical, mythical, and above all esoteric figures) achieves first this impossible naming of the One, then its pulverizing, finally its reversal toward the dark region of the unnamable Thing. This means that we are not engaged here in a debate internal to Jewish or Christian monotheism, about the possibility or impossibility of naming God, about the oneness of multiplicity of names. Within Nerval's subjectivity the crisis of naming and that of the authority answerable for subjective oneness went deeper. (164).

Here Kristeva argues that a poem presents the reader with a new symbolic order, in which its author repurposes the cultural symbols he or she has inherited. While Gerard de Nerval's work certainly treats social issues, Kristeva perceives the transformation made possible by the creative process as being first and foremost personal. She presents the insight gained by Gerard de Nerval transcending contemporaneous debates, instead addressing a more fundamental conflict between the individual and the symbolic order.

In this respect, Judith Butler's interpretation of Freudian melancholia forms a sharp contrast with that of Kristeva. For Butler, the source of melancholia in the individual is primarily social. Throughout *The Psychic Life of Power*, she argues that culture tells certain subjects that they matter, while it suggests that others are failures. In most instances, melancholic subjects mourn something that they are not permitted to be in the culture they inhabit. Butler elaborates,

> It seems clear that the positions of "masculine" and "feminine," which Freud, in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), understood as the effects of laborious and uncertain accomplishment, are established in part through prohibitions which demand the loss of certain sexual attachments, and demand as well that losses not be avowed, and not be grieved....We might understand the force of this accomplishment as mandating the abandonment of homosexual attachments of, perhaps more trenchantly, preempting the possibility of homosexual attachment, a foreclosure of possibility which produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss. (135)

Here Butler argues that social norms not only foreclose the possibility of homosexual relationships, but also prevent one from acknowledging or grieving this loss. With that said, Butler appropriates Freud's concept of melancholia, re-envisioning it as a conceptual framework for understanding and critiquing these cultural norms. While Kristeva's book represents a fairly similar project, Butler situates the individual within a matrix of

complex social practices, envisioning the individual psyche as socially constructed in a way that Kristeva does not.

This contrast is embodied in Butler's discussions of power. Philosopher Sara Salih writes that "in Butler's analyses one is not born, but rather one becomes, a subject...and the way one does so is by submitting to power" (120). Indeed, Butler argues that one learns what one can and cannot be from those who wield power in society. This "regulation of the psyche" serves to reinforce both individual identity as it relates to established social boundaries. She writes that "forms of regulating power are sustained in part through the formation of the subject," suggesting that individual identity formation remains a crucial aspect of maintaining power for dominant social groups (19). Unlike Kristeva, who posits the individual as forging personal identity in relative isolation, Butler envisions the individual as negotiating selfhood with received ideas from society. In this respect,, Butler suggests that an understanding of broader social structures remains necessary before the individual can attain the personal insight that Kristeva describes. Thus insight into one's own identity offers possibilities for social change that are not possible within the essentialist framework offered by Kristeva.

Butler and the Individual Psyche

Butler's argument raises substantial questions about Kristeva's portrayal of melancholia as a source of individual transformation. In Butler's assessment, one cannot redefine one's perceived identity in psychoanalysis without reexamining the social and cultural assumptions that shape the individual psyche. This is because the self emerges only in relation to the power structures present in society. For Butler, individual identity

(whether it is one's actual identity or a mourned potentiality for one's being) presupposes a world (or a possible world) of social relations in which the subject discovers his or her limitations. Butler writes of melancholic subjects, for example,

> ....melancholia is not an asocial psychic state. In fact, melancholia is produced to the extent that the social world is eclipsed by the psychic, that a certain transfer of attachment from objects to ego takes place, not without a contamination of the psychic sphere by the social sphere that is abandoned. (180)

Thus even the individual who challenges oppressive cultural discourses remains a fundamentally social being. In cases where the subject mourns lost possibilities for his or her identity, he or she also mourns a potential state of affairs in which they are not prohibited by mainstream culture. Thus Butler presents culture as a conceptual framework that proves necessary for articulating observations about one's perceived identity.

In addition to presenting the self as socially constructed, Butler envisions the cultural forces at work on the individual as dynamic and ever-changing. Early in *The Psychic Life of Power,* Butler writes that "the temporal paradox of the subject is such that, of necessity, we must lose the perspective of a subject already formed in order to account for our own being. That 'becoming' is no simple continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and risks, compelled yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being" (30). In passages like this one, Butler suggests that individual identity is never fully constituted, as the subject by necessity discards social ideas that lose contemporary relevance. Thus Butler posits individual identity as evolving along with social norms. While she argues that the subject gleans a coherent sense of self from these

cultural discourses, this perceived identity remains inherently unstable, as it is constituted by social ideas that are always subject to change.

In this respect, Butler borrows substantially from Foucault's analysis of power. Foucault argues that the most formative influence on one's identity is not the state, but everyday social interactions where individuals create categories of identity. As in *The Psychic Life of Power*, subjection is an ongoing and, in some ways, a generative process. Foucault writes in Volume One of *The History of Sexuality*,

> We must not look for who has the power in the order of sexuality (men, adults, parents, doctors) and who is deprived of it (women, adolescents, children, patients); nor for who has the right to know and who is forced to remain ignorant. We must seek rather the pattern of the modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process...Relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are 'matrices of transformations.' (99)

Throughout such passages, Foucault presents the individual as appropriating and revising received ideas as culture changes. Butler takes Foucault's argument a step further, envisioning this process as a source of agency for the subject. She writes in *The Psychic Life of Power* that "A power exerted on a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject's becoming" (11). Subjection makes possible the self, and, for Butler, a coherent idea of oneself in relation to society offers a starting point for social change. As in Foucault's work, identity is not fixed for Butler. Her discussion of subjection offers the possibility of re-imagining one's identity, particularly one's perception of oneself in relation to others.

In many ways, Butler's discussion of melancholia in *The Psychic Life of Power*

exemplifies these ideas. The process of social transformation that she describes surrounding melancholy, in which mourning becomes a source of revolt and social unrest, is a dynamic one. Because, in Butler's assessment, the individual's identity remains intertwined with received ideas, his or her process of questioning cultural norms unfolds along with social life. Butler writes, for example,

> Consider the inversions of 'woman' and 'woman,' depending on the staging and address of their performance, of 'queer' and 'queer,' depending on pathologizing or contestatory remarks. Both examples concern, not an opposition between reactionary and progressive usage, but rather a progressive usage that requires and repeats the reactionary in order to effect a subversive reterritorialization. (101)

Here Butler suggests that, as in Foucault's work, one's identity is never fully constituted. Rather, the identities, prohibitions, and boundaries imposed upon us are constantly being redefined as society evolves. In Butler's assessment, melancholia arises from this set of constantly shifting cultural rules. It allows us to become aware of the possibilities for one's identity as they are foreclosed by society. As philosopher Moya Lloyd notes, Butler's subject only becomes capable of action as he or she is subjected to this kind of power. She writes, "In *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler renders this idea as the 'process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject.' This captures the dual dimensions of subjection: that power acts on an individual in order to 'activate' a subject" (64). Thus subjection remains a starting point for melancholia, self-awareness, and, as a result, a sense of agency for the subject.

In many ways, Butler elaborates on Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, as her predecessor did not include a discussion of the psyche in his landmark discussion of

power. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, however, the psyche becomes the nexus of social and political change. Consider Butler's discussion of melancholia and the super-ego,

> ...we might rephrase Freud and consider guilt as the burning back of into the ego of homosexual attachment. If the loss becomes a renewed scene of conflict, and if the aggression that follows from that loss cannot be articulated or externalized, then it rebounds upon the ego itself, in the form of a super-ego. (141)

Thus the super-ego arises from an ineffable loss, a possibility for being that has been foreclosed by society. For Butler, social change begins when conflicts in society are enacted upon the psychological terrain of the subject. As the subject internalizes loss possibilities for his or her existence in society, he or she forms an implicit critique of mainstream culture, its norms, and its social categories. Melancholia serves as the catalyst for this process, which, for Butler, unfolds along with culture and its oppressive discourses.

Butler's presentation of melancholia as a constantly unfolding social discontentment forms a stark contrast with Kristeva's revision of the same Freudian concept. The two philosophers' work certainly proves similar as they envision melancholia as an opportunity for a subversive re-imagining of one's perceived identity. Yet Kristeva presents cultural symbols, and the social categories that arise from them, as static and unchanging. Consider her discussion of language as allegory, in which she writes,

> Whether it appears as such or vanishes from the imagination, allegory is inscribed in the very logic of the imagination, which its didactic oversimplicity has the privilege of revealing ponderously. Indeed, we sense the imaginary experience not as theological symbolism or secular commitment but as flaring-up of dead meaning with a surplus of meaning,

> in which the speaker first discovers the shelter of an ideal but above all the opportunity to play it again in illusion and disillusion... (102)

Kristeva presents the subject as inheriting not only a set of cultural symbols, but also a fixed logic that accompanies them. In this sense, culture is not subject to ongoing change in the sense that Butler describes. Likewise, individual identity could only be transformed in psychoanalysis to a limited extent when operating in such a conceptual framework.

Kristeva, Lacan, and the Symbolic Realm

Approached with these ideas in mind, Kristeva's argument remains ill-equipped to handle the questions raised in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Kristeva portrays cultural symbols as static, and as a result, larger social categories are not subject to change. In this sense, melancholia proves transformative only for the individual psyche, rather than for social relations. Consider her discussion of historical subject matter in Marguerite Duras's fiction,

> Nevertheless, Duras's melancholia is also like an explosion in history. Private suffering absorbs political horror into the subject's psychic microcosm. The French woman in Hiroshima might have come out of Stendhal; perhaps she is even eternal and yet she nonetheless exists because of the war, the Nazis, the bomb.... (234)

Kristeva posits transformation through melancholia as a purely individual phenomenon, even when it occurs at in the midst of social and political turmoil. This is the case, in Kristeva's assessment, because language presents us with a set of shared categories with which to view the world. For Kristeva, these provide a necessary framework for the

subject's linguistic exchanges with his or her community. Thus transformation of the individual psyche must take place within these prescribed boundaries. Unlike Butler, Kristeva delineates clear parameters for the individual's psychic transformation through melancholia.

These differences between *The Psychic Life of Power* and *Black Sun* derive, for the most part, from Kristeva's Lacanian influences. Throughout *The Language of the Self*, Lacan divides culture into the imaginary and the symbolic realm. For Lacan, the symbolic provides us with shared conceptual categories from society, while the imaginary provides us with fictitious images of ourselves as whole. This image of the self as whole provides us with a fixed point, allowing the individual to express his or her self and thus enter the symbolic realm. In other words, one's concept of self is the foundation for one's existence as a speaking subject. He writes in *The Language of the Self*,

> The Symbolic has wider connotations also. In another sense it is exactly equivalent to Levi-Strauss's notion of the "world of rules' and the 'symbolic relationships' into which we are born and to which we learn to conform, however much our dreams may express our wish for a disorder or counterorder. (270)

Lacan perceives shared cultural symbols and the logic that accompanies them as necessary to linguistic exchanges within a given community. While the individual may perceive such rules as undesirable, Lacan presents conformity as a crucial foundation for one's interactions with others.

With that said, Kristeva's work borrows significantly from Lacan, particularly her definition of melancholia. By presenting melancholia as a loss of speech, she ultimately

pathologizes individual attempts to disengage completely from the established symbolic order. Although Kristeva acknowledges the possibility of attaining insight while afflicted with melancholia, she posits reintegration into the established symbolic order as the ideal recovery. She writes that,

> The excess of affect has thus no other means of coming to the fore than to produce new languages---strange concatenations, idiolects, poetics. Until the weight of the primal Thing prevails, and all translatability becomes impossible. Melancholia then ends up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning: if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die. (42)

For Kristeva, melancholia and the "death of speech" that accompanies it provide one with insight about language, its rules, and its possibilities. Nonetheless, Kristeva envisions this state of affairs as temporary. As in Lacan's work, consensus and conformity ultimately enable one to participate in linguistic exchanges. Because the individual must reintegrate in order to function in society, Kristeva retains fairly modest ambitions for the transformative possibilities of melancholia.

With that said, there are certainly parallels between Butler's work and Kristeva's. Both philosophers present cultural symbols as being imposed on the subject by those in power in society. Yet Kristeva's discussions of language have normative qualities, which seem problematic if her work is to have concrete social and political consequences. Throughout *Black Sun*, Kristeva depicts the desire to speak as originating in the most fundamental familial losses, particularly child's separation from the mother. She writes,

> What we call meaning is the ability of the *infans* to record the signifier of parental desire and include itself therein in his own fashion.....It will be recalled that separation from the object starts the so-called depressive phase. Upon losing mother and relying on negation, I retrieve her as sign,

image, word. (62-63)

Here Kristeva portrays the symbolic systems that we create as originating in familial relationships, particularly those between parent and child. Just as the "infans" seeks to resolve oedipal conflict through language, Kristeva suggests that larger symbolic systems derive from the same underlying psychic tension. Throughout *Black Sun*, these family relationships are portrayed as an inevitable step in the construction of the subject. Because linguistic exchange originates in inevitable, and in many ways necessary, parent-child relationships, Kristeva envisions little or no revision of the entrenched symbolic order. While compellingly argued, this portrayal of language is not one what observes in society. Because language evolves and changes along with culture, Kristeva's normative portrayal of it presents problems if her argument is to have concrete social and political consequences.

With that said, one certainly might argue that Kristeva did not intend for her book to be a social and political treatise. This is a well-founded objection. It's important to note, however, that Kristeva did not intend for her theoretical framework to rule out or severely limit the possibility of social and political change. She writes in *Black Sun* that "Speaking beings, from their ability to endure in time up to their enthusiastic, learned, or simply amusing constructions, demand a break, a renunciation, an unease at their foundations" (42). Here Kristeva depicts the melancholic subject as questioning the very foundations of linguistic discourse, ultimately forging a new perceived relation to the symbolic order. Yet one might argue that this not possible without revising the social and political order. By presenting culture as immutable, Kristeva also limits the extent to which the individual can revise and question his or her perceived identity. With that in

mind, the possibility of social change seems desirable, even necessary, for many of Kristeva's arguments in *Black Sun*.

Butler's borrowing from Foucault enables her to claim these concrete social and political consequences for melancholia, which are not possible within the theoretical framework offered by Kristeva. In many ways, these influences also allow for a more realistic portrait of society and its conflicts. Consider Butler's discussions of power and melancholia. She writes,

> Melancholia is a rebellion that has been put down, crushed. Yet it is not a static affair; it continues as a kind of "work" that takes place by deflection. Figured within the workings of the psyche is the power of the state to preempt an insurrectionary rage. The "critical agency" of the melancholic is at once a social and psychic instrument. (191)

For Butler, the power structures in society are inherently unstable. Because the subject's psychic life arises from these instantiations of power, he or she inevitably questions his or her place in this discourse. Melancholia serves as a catalyst for this process, prompting the individual to engage in critical reevaluation of the social ideas that inform their identity, appropriating and repurposing them as a form of resistance. Butler refers to this process as "resignification, redeployment, and subversive citation from within." Her discussions of law, the state, and melancholia exemplify these ideas. Butler elaborates,

> ...the incorporation of the idea of "Law" underscores the contingent relation between a given state and the ideality of its power....That this ideality cannot be reduced to any of its incorporations does not mean, however, that it subsists in a noumenal sphere beyond all embodiments. Rather, the incorporations are sites of rearticulation, conditions for a "working through" and, potentially, a "throwing off." (191)

Here Butler's work diverges significantly from that of Kristeva. She rejects the idea of "a noumenal realm" of unchanging cultural symbols, suggesting instead that their meaning for the subject is constantly changing along with the power structures in society.

For Butler, cultural symbols and their meaning prove to be as dynamic as society itself. In response to Lacan's discussions of power and the symbolic realm, she writes,

> Foucault formulates resistance as effect of the very power that it is said to oppose. This insistence on the dual possibility of being both constituted by the law and an effect of resistance to the law marks a departure from the Lacanian framework, for where Lacan restricts the notion of social power to the symbolic realm and delegates resistance to the imaginary, Foucault recasts the symbolic as relations of power and understands resistance an effect of power....the symbolic produces the possibility of its own subversions, and these subversions are unanticipated effects of its symbolic interpellations. (98-99)

In other words, Butler perceives revisions of the symbolic order described by Lacan as being inevitable. For Butler, it provides a conceptual framework within which parody, subversion, and resistance may take place, and without which none of these things would be possible. As in Foucault's work, the power structures are generative, as they give rise to social categories and the possibility of assigning new meanings to them. As Sarah Salih writes, "unlike Lacan, Butler insists the law is generative and plural" (60). In this sense, Butler presents us with dynamic and constantly changing symbolic order, which affords possibilities for subversion not present in the conceptual framework offered by Kristeva.

Culture, Subjectivity, and the Body

The two philosophers' interpretations of Freud's writings on melancholia arise

fundamentally different concepts of individual identity, only one of which affords a genuine opportunity for social change. For Butler, the self is socially constructed. Kristeva, on the other hand, presents certain biological processes as the most formative influence on one's sense of self. This biological essentialism is especially prominent in her discussion of gender. Kristeva writes that

> for man and woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized---whether the lose object is recovered as an erotic object (as is the case for male heterosexuality or female homosexuality), or it is transposed by means of unbelievable symbolic effort, the advent of which one can only admire, which eroticizes the other (the other sex, in the case of the heterosexual woman) or transforms cultural constructs into a "sublime" erotic object.... (28)

In passages like this one, sex and gender remain inextricable, as one's identity as a man or woman arises from biological processes. Scholar Noelle McAffee notes Kristeva has been criticized for attributing socially constructed aspects of female identity to biology, a position that "collapses into biological essentialism" (80). This trend remains especially apparent in Kristeva's presentation of the subject's loss of the mother, in which he or she becomes an autonomous being. One might argue that the categories of identity that Kristeva delineates as being possible through this development----heterosexuality or homosexuality---are imposed upon us by culture, rather than being biological facts. With that said, Kristeva's biological essentialism leads to a portrayal of the subject as, for the most part, passive, even within the transformative space afforded by psychoanalysis.

Along these lines, Kristeva presents many cultural discourses as arising from biological facts. This line of reasoning leaves little opportunity for individuals to

challenge cultural discourse, as biological processes are immutable and not subject to change. Throughout *Black Sun*, she argues that even melancholia, and the linguistic transformations that accompany it, arise from inevitable, yet often traumatic, developments like childbirth, separation from the mother, and the fear of dying. She writes in an illustration of feminine depression entitled "Virgin Mother,"

> Narcissistic wounds and castration, sexual dissatisfaction and fantasy-laden death-ends become telescoped into a simultaneously killing and irretrievable burden that organizes her subjectivity; within, she is nothing but bruises and paralysis; outside, all that was left to her was acting out or sham activism. Isabel needed that "black hole" of melancholia in order to construct her living motherhood and activities outside it, just as the others organize themselves around repression or splitting. (87-88)

In this passage, Kristeva suggests that the patient's transition into motherhood ultimately prompts her to mourn lost possibilities for her selfhood, and hence re-imagine her perceived identity in relation to the symbolic realm. While the "black hole" presented by melancholia allows the patient to renegotiate aspects of her perceived identity in relation to the symbolic realm, this transformation takes place within the parameters circumscribed by biology. For Kristeva, biological processes like childbirth as having different consequences for the psychic development of every individual, but they often give rise to comparable symbolic discourses. Indeed, our biology not only shapes the ways we inhabit culture, but also the social categories that manifest within society. Because our biology is not subject to change, Kristeva presents social categories, and the symbolic discourses surrounding them, as being immutable.

For Butler, however, even the biological processes described by Kristeva are discursively constructed, and the subject remains capable of transforming the meaning of

these oppressive cultural discourses. Melancholia becomes as a catalyst for this process of cultural critique. She writes that

> ....guilt emerges in the course of melancholia not only, as the Freudian view would have it, to keep the dead object alive, but to keep the living object from "death," where death means the death of love, including the occasions of separation and loss. (25)

Here Butler presents the subject's psychic life as arising from social prohibitions, and in the process, revising and challenging them. For Butler, the body and the social categories surrounding it are no exception. While Kristeva posits female sexuality, for instance, as arising from biological fact, Butler presents these same biological characteristics as capable of being reinterpreted, resignified, and revised by the individual psyche. It is certainly true that not everything is discursively constructed, and that some social phenomena recur across cultures. With that in mind, Kristeva presents a somewhat extreme position by suggesting many social categories are grounded in our biology. One must note the role of biology in shaping the way that we inhabit culture, yet this sort of biological essentialism encourages passivity on the part of the subject. If social categories are grounded in biology, one might argue, it is not possible revise them, even in the interest of equality. Moreover, biological essentialism also affords the possibility of justifying inequalities of social groups as natural, and hence, acceptable. Approached with these ideas in mind, Kristeva's biological essentialism seems undesirable in that it severely limits the social changes that we should strive for.

Approached with these ideas in mind, *The Psychic Life of Power* offers a radical revision of earlier writings on melancholia by writers like Freud and Kristeva. Philosopher Sara Salih interprets Butler as reacting against Freud's portrayal of

melancholy subjects as being passive, suggesting instead that melancholia proves generative. Salih writes that "The subject's relationship to power is ambivalent, paradoxical, and necessary, and the subject both resists and embraces a multiplicitous law without which is unable to survive" (245). Such an interpretation seems plausible in light of Butler's presenting the subject as capable of resignifying, reworking, and revising cultural discourses. With that said, *The Psychic Life of Power* allows for the possibility of social change in a way that *Black Sun* does not, as these transformations must take place within a set of predetermined, and unchangeable, boundaries.

Judith Butler's The Psychic Life of Power: *Social Implications*

In a recent work by Moya Lloyd, Butler's work is criticized for lacking concrete social implications. According to this line of argument, the subject cannot reject the received social ideas that constitute their identity without suffering psychic dissolution. In *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, she writes,

> What is less clear is how...Butler develops a non-autonomous account of agency. What is it, that is, that enables the subject to transform their social and political situation? Although Butler hints that the trauma of subjection contains within it resources for reworking and resignifying the painful interpellations constituting the subject, these resources are not explored or identified in any detail in *Psychic Life*. Indeed, it is unclear how the norms regulating the psyche can be reconfigured without threatening the subject with psychic dissolution. (101)

Here Lloyd presents *The Psychic Life of Power* as advocating a rejection of the symbolic order as a way to initiate social change. While Lloyd correctly acknowledges the logical problems inherent in such an argument, one might argue that is a rather contentious

reading of Butler's work. By suggesting that reworking and resignifying cultural discourses would lead the subject to "psychic dissolution," Lloyd presents the individual as incapable of evolving and changing along with the culture they inhabit. This statement may be true of Kristeva's work, as she imagines the symbolic order as arising from immutable aspects of the human experience (such as parent-child conflict, oedipal desire, and familial relationships). Butler, on the other hand, rejects such a static view of the self. Instead, she suggests that individual identity is constantly unfolding along with culture.

In this sense, Butler is advocating something much different than the rejection of the symbolic order described by Lloyd. Rather than eschewing received social categories, or passively accepting them as Kristeva does, Butler suggests instead that the subject inhabit them in a critical and empowered way. She writes in *The Psychic Life of Power*,

> ...a subject only remains a subject through reiteration or rearaticulation of itself as a subject, and this dependency of the subject on repetition for coherence may constitute that subject's incoherence, its incomplete character. This repetition, or better, iterability thus becomes the non-place of subversion, the possibility of a re-embodying of the subjectivating norm that can redirect its normativity. (99)

Because the subject, for Butler, is socially constructed, she argues that one cannot reject the received cultural ideas that constitute individual identity. Rather, the subject can only revise and rearticulate them. For Butler, this ongoing process of "reiteration" remains necessary in order for the subject to retain a coherent sense of self in relation to society. Approached with these ideas in mind, Lloyd's criticisms address a set of circumstances that remain impossible within the theoretical framework offered by Butler.

With that said, Butler's presentation of melancholy gender in *The Psychic Life of Power* exemplifies these ideas. In her assessment, individuals are largely unaware of the ways in which cultural practices surrounding gender shape their identity. She presents melancholia as a source of awareness of the social categories and restrictions that are imposed upon us. For Butler, melancholia presents a unique opportunity for us to examine, reflect upon, and question the social categories that shape individual identity. She elaborates,

> Indeed, one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to preserve the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert loss as a complete loss. Here we see that letting the object go means, paradoxically, not full abandonment of the object but transferring the status of the object from external to internal...

In passages like this one, Butler suggests that melancholia prompts the subject to become aware of lost possibilities for his or her personal identity. In doing so, the subject integrates these foreclosed possibilities into his or her ego, in effect revising their perceived relationship to established social categories. As stated earlier, Butler envisions melancholia as a catalyst for the subject's realizations about the power structures in his or her culture. In her assessment, this process is an ongoing one, as the subject's identity formation is never complete, nor should it be.

Approached with these ideas in mind, Butler's argument offers several concrete possibilities for social and political change. Philosopher Sarah Salih describes melancholia as a "self-directed violence," which can be redeployed for "subversive" ends (134). Approached with these ideas in mind, *The Psychic Life of Power* invites the

subject to revise established social categories. Consider Butler's description of loss as historically situated. She writes,

> The historicity of loss is to be found in identification and, hence, in the very forms that attachment is bound to take. "Libido" and "attachment" in such a view could not be conceived as free-floating energies, but as having a historicity that could never fully be recovered. (194-195)

In passages like this one, Butler posits melancholia as the subject's response to a constantly changing cultural landscape. For Butler, melancholia unfolds along with culture, continually posing new challenges to established social categories. Approached with these ideas in mind, Butler presents social categories as being both oppressive and necessary for constituting the subject's identity. Throughout *The Psychic Life of Power*, melancholia prompts the subject to become aware of the oppression from which their selfhood arises, and to reclaim agency through resignification.

Along these lines, Butler's presents melancholia as encouraging the subject to embrace otherness, rather than conforming to the entrenched social order. In *The Judith Butler Reader*, philosopher Sara Salih interprets Butler as arguing that the subject's perceived identity emerges in relation to the other. In Salih's assessment, this interface between self and other is a generative process, which allows the subject to gain knowledge of his or her identity in relation to others. Salih writes that "...Butler insists on the constitutive, productive nature of melancholia, asserting that it is only by recognizing the other that one becomes anything at all" (245). For Butler, knowledge of the other remains necessary to one's own development as a social agent. This line of reasoning encourages one to better understand individuals who are unlike oneself, in effect advocating a greater understanding and awareness of all social groups.

Approached with these ideas in mind, Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* offers possibilities for social change that remain unattainable within the conceptual framework presented in *Black Sun*. Here knowledge of the other, and the subsequent understanding one that gains of one's own identity, does little to change received cultural ideas. In Kristeva's opinion, knowledge of the self can only be gained within the parameters circumscribed by society, its categories of identity, and its symbols. She writes, "I shall accept Hanna Segal's hypothesis, according to which, beginning with separation (let us note that a lack is necessary for the sign to emerge) the child produces or uses objects or vocalizations that are the symbolic equivalents of what is lacking" (23). For Kristeva, the symbolic exchange we see in society arises from certain immutable aspects of the human condition. As a result, Kristeva delineates aspects of the social order that are not subject to revision.

Consider Kristeva's discussion of the gender categories imposed upon subjects by society. She writes in her illustrations of feminine depression,

> Being caught in woman's speech is not merely a matter of chance that could be explained by the greater frequently of feminine depressions---a sociologically proven fact. This may also reveal an aspect of feminine sexuality: Its addiction to the maternal Thing and its lesser aptitude for restorative perversion. (71)

As Kristeva presents it, female sexuality is constructed through fairly inevitable psychic developments, such as the subject's inevitable loss of the mother as an infant. Throughout *Black Sun*, these formative psychological experiences give rise to social boundaries, and as a result, culture can only be changed to a limited extent. In many ways, these ideas are exemplified by Kristeva's first case study, "Cannabalistic Solitude,"

which depicts a melancholic patient's relationship with her mother and the *joissance*, or bliss, that becomes possible after her process of psychoanalysis. Kristeva writes that "within feminine fantasy...*joissance* assumes a triumph over the death-bearing mother, in order for the interior to become a source of rewards while eventually becoming a source of biological life, childbearing, and motherhood" (79). In passages like this one, social categories are largely immutable, as they are determined by biological processes and their impact on the human psyche. Such a theoretical framework does not allow for cultural practices to be revised in the dynamic process that Butler describes. Rather, cultural critiques must occur within set boundaries, particularly those circumscribed by the cultural symbols that the subject inherits. Thus Kristeva's vision of culture proves to be, for the most part, static.

For Butler, however, the process of understanding both self and other has transformative possibilities for society and the power structures that define it. Because she envisions cultural symbols as dynamic and constantly changing, Butler offers an application of Freudian melancholia with tangible social implications.

Possible Objections: Is Butler's Abstractness a Problem?

Many feminist philosophers, particularly Martha Nussbaum, have critiqued Butler's work as being abstract and lacking concrete applicability. In an article called "The Professor of Parody," Nussbaum criticizes Butler's work for three distinct reasons. The first is that Butler does not present us with specific laws and cultural institutions that need to be changed, stating that Butler's ideas retain "only the flimsiest of connections

with the situations of real women" (2). Secondly, Nussbaum criticizes Butler for writing from a position of privilege, stating that

> It would seem that "It would seem that she is addressing a group of young feminist theorists in the academy who are neither students of philosophy, caring about what Althusser and Freud and Kripke really said, nor outsiders, needing to feel informed about the nature of their projects and persuaded of their worth. The implied audience is remarkably docile. Subservient to the oracular voice of Butler's text, and dazzled by its patina of high concept abstractness, the imagined reader poses few questions, requests no arguments and no clear definitions of terms. (3)

In short, Nussbaum perceives Butler as writing to a largely academic audience, rather than addressing the needs of individuals who have been marginalized in society. For Nussbaum, this problem could be solved, in part, by presenting the reader with concrete definitions of equality and social justice, rather than the nebulous definition of terms that we see in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Thirdly, Nussbaum criticizes Butler's lack of clarity, stating that she often poses questions to the reader, the answers of which are sometimes evident from the material, but often "are much more indeterminate" (3).

While Nussbaum certainly presents a compelling critique of Butler's work, one might argue that the weaknesses Nussbaum delineates are actually strengths. Given Butler's presentation of the social landscape as being inherently unstable, a fixed ethical framework that delineates specific criteria for equality seems not only unattainable, but undesirable. Moreover, by allowing the subject to define equality and social justice for his or her self, Butler's purported lack of clarity allows more freedom for the subject than would a traditional ethical framework. Rather than imposing a set of definitions, terms, and political goals on the reader, Butler encourages marginalized individuals to become aware of the power structures in society, and also to question and revise them in ways

that they see fit. Butler writes in *The Psychic Life of Power* that "A power exerted on the subject is a power assumed by the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject's becoming" (11). For Butler, the subject's "becoming" an agent after becoming aware of the power structures in his or her society remains fundamentally different for every subject. By allowing the subject to define equality on their own terms, Butler's theoretical framework allows for the possibility of multiple definitions of equality and social justice, which seems appropriate given the changeable nature of the social landscape that we inhabit.

Conclusion

In short, Butler and Kristeva offer what seem to be fairly similar revisions of Freud's writings on melancholia. In such works as "Mourning and Melancholia," The Interpretation of Dreams, and A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis, Freud presents melancholia as a "pathological mourning," a state that he perceives as dangerous and undesirable. Rather than pathologizing melancholia, Butler and Kristeva present this affliction as affording unique opportunities for personal transformation, particularly with respect to one's perceived relationship to language. For Butler and Kristeva, the melancholia prompts the subject to renegotiate his or her position in the symbolic realm by disrupting the normal relationship between the subject's ego and superego. With that said, the two philosophers diverge with respect to the melancholic subject's ability to revise the cultural symbols he or she encounters in society. This difference between the two philosophers' work give rise to fundamentally different possibilities for social change, and in turn, for creating a just society.

While acknowledging the transformative possibilities inherent in melancholia, Kristeva presents cultural symbols as being, for the most part, static and unchanging. Social change, then, takes place within the parameters circumscribed by the symbolic system one has inherited. For Kristeva, larger social categories are not subject to significant revision, even for the individual who has been psychically transformed by melancholia. In many ways, her interpretation of Freud arises from her biological essentialism, as she presents immutable biological processes as giving rise to cultural symbols and categories of identity within society. This line of reasoning, while consistent and well articulated, leaves little possibility for significant social change.

Approached with these ideas in mind, Butler's presentation of cultural symbols proves to be more nuanced. For Butler, culture is dynamic and constantly changing. While the subject's identity arises from the power structures in society, she envisions an ongoing exchange occurring between the individual psyche and the culture he or she inhabits. While culture may impose categories of identity upon the subject, in effect dictating what they can and cannot be, Butler presents the subject as resignifying, reworking, redefining these discourses. Even the biological process that Kristeva describes, in Butler's assessment, are discursively constructed and subject to reinterpretation within a given culture. Melancholia serves as a catalyst for these revisions, as it prompts the subject to become aware of lost possibilities for his or her own being.

Approached with these ideas in mind, *The Psychic Life of Power* affords opportunities for social change that are not present in Black Sun. Not only can social categories be renegotiated within this theoretical framework, but otherness can also be

welcomed and embraced. For Butler, the subject is socially constructed, and requires knowledge of society's power structures and boundaries to understand his or her own relation to them. Because knowledge of the other leads to self-knowledge for the subject, she presents knowledge of other social categories as desirable, even necessary to defining the self. In this respect, *The Psychic Life of Power* affords possibilities for social justice, pluralism, and subversion that are not present in *Black Sun*.

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